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SUBJECT: Lukashenko's State of the Republic Tirade

Refs: (A) 05 Minsk 498, (B) Minsk 558

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: In his May 23 annual address before parliament, Lukashenko declared all is well in Belarus. He raised the trial balloon of establishing a Party of Power, but said he himself did not need it. He ordered the parliament and government to work with the four pillars of society, labor unions, local government, youth and veterans' groups, to keep Belarus stable. On economics, he claimed a massive international demand for Belarusian goods exists, but acknowledged the poor quality of these goods. He asserted Belarus faces serious but "absurd" pressure from the West, but is equally threatened by rising energy prices. He supported union with Russia, but added that Belarus and Russia are still determining what form the union would take. Answering several questions from MPs, he announced the GOB would challenge western visa bans in international court and ban U.S. and Canadian planes from flying over Belarus. Lukashenko gave one of the shortest speeches in memory (less than an hour) and read most of it. However, during the Q and A session he seemed more like the old Lukashenko, feistily fending off implied threats and criticisms. End summary.

¶2. (U) On May 23, Lukashenko gave his annual state of the country speech to parliament, senior government officials and assorted diplomats. At 53 minutes, this year's speech was less than half as long as in previous years. Although Lukashenko traditionally has given this speech in mid-April, he claimed this year that he had to postpone his presentation because of elections (March 19) and the All-Belarusian People's Assembly (first week of March). Lukashenko seemed to have recovered some of his pre-disappearance energy, but he was not the same pre-election firebrand Lukashenko. Speaking less bombastically than last year, Lukashenko frequently mopped his face and cleared his throat, and his cheeks appeared sunken.

All is Well; Presidential Mandate  
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¶3. (U) Lukashenko opened by explaining that there are no grounds in Belarus for conflict; the economy is growing, changes are occurring gradually, and people have the highest confidence in government. He claimed the high level of support (officially 83%) he received in March elections proves this statement, and shows, "Citizens voted for a decent life, for Belarus' independence and well-being." Later Lukashenko explained that authorities would continue to work for the well being of citizens, but they would also learn to obey the people's wishes. Justice, he said, is finding a sound balance between the interests of the state, society and individuals.

14. (U) Regardless, Lukashenko emphatically stated that the massive support he received for his re-election showed the populace has confidence in him and "in the whole system of power." In return, he claimed the government would repay this debt to the people for their support, stating, "We are ready to listen to all working constructively for the benefit of our homeland, who can hear, who want to work and act, but not for those wishing to get incomes from political campaigns and processes [the opposition]."

#### Representative Democracy

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15. (U) Stressing, "We do not declare populist slogans under the guise of democratic values, we do not cry about pseudo freedom and justice," Lukashenko claimed all of Belarus' major issues are solved by the people through elections, referendums, and all-Belarusian assemblies [note: which occur every five years]. Saying that, "Opponents dwell on the creation of civil society in the republic," he argued that a strong civil society already exists, with more than 2,000 public associations, 17 political parties, and 41 labor unions. Lukashenko claimed the state and society are two components of one whole, linked by constructive cooperation.

#### Party of Power, Maybe, But Not to Democratize

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16. (U) Lukashenko stated that in recent years more and more people have asked him to create a "Party of Power." He admitted it would be good if such a party existed, but modestly argued that such a party must arise from below, not be created from the top. Therefore, he will not try and create such a party, but would support one if it arose. However, referring to himself in the third person Lukashenko stressed that this, "does not mean that Lukashenko will quit politics for the construction of a sort of

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civil society and will create a sociopolitical force for himself... And this does not mean that Lukashenko is trying to make a gesture to signal the state's democratization, in inverted commas, under western pressure."

#### Four Pillars of Society: Trade Unions

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17. (U) Stealing a plank from the opposition, he then claimed Belarusian society depends on four pillars, which the state must support: trade unions, local councils of deputies, youth and veteran organizations. He expects trade unions to become more active in supporting state policies, for the benefit of the people, and took the credit over the past several years of making the unions, "deviate from those wild and unclear policies they were implementing and stay next to the people, reach out to the people, and become the people's backbone and carry out the policies the people need." [Note: in 2001 Lukashenko's main electoral opponent came from the trade unions. Shortly after the election the GOB took control of the largest trade union group.] He charged trade unions with improving workplace safety and defending workers' rights, especially against private employers. He concluded, "I am confident that if people feel real support from the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, 100 percent of workers will join your ranks. Your authority is a strong means against attacks from various international and opposition structures which speculate on slogans of protection of human rights."

#### Local Councils of Deputies: Defend Against the Opposition

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18. (U) Lukashenko criticized local government deputies for failing to work with the people to solve their problems. He was especially sharp in accusing them of heartlessness and arrogance in refusing to eliminate excess bureaucracy. However, he did argue that local

deputies should help the people for their own sake, but to block the opposition. He claimed that presidential and parliamentary elections have shown "who and what the vast majority of the population" support, but the opposition is planning to take advantage of the people's lack of support in local government to win seats in next year's local elections. Lukashenko argued, "Our opponents are getting ready for a tough battle, dreaming of revenge for their recent crushing defeat and hoping to create a springboard for the future. It will not be the government machinery but specific candidates who will oppose this. Decent, authoritative people who have initiative and care about their compatriots' problems. All of us should be working in this direction now."

#### Youth Groups: Working for the State

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¶9. (U) Lukashenko charged youth groups with defending Belarus' youth from "various information and ideological processes" and "those destructive associations which use the immature intellects of boys and girls for extremist purposes [the opposition]." Lukashenko especially tasked the Belarusian Republican Youth Movement (BRSM, sometimes referred to as the "Lukayouth"), with leading this charge. Admitting the BRSM has been frequently useful, Lukashenko promised to keep providing them with "all-out state support." He also tied the BRSM to its Soviet heritage, "Young people are eager to participate actively in the public life the Komsomol once experienced. They want to improve themselves, realize themselves, deal with serious problems for the benefit of their homeland... Your main task is to mobilize youth initiatives for the sake of public interests."

¶10. (U) He chided the BRSM for failing to "find a common language" with students, and ordered them to work more with the Young Pioneers and other youth groups. Lukashenko concluded, "I would like the BRSM to become a real leader of the entire youth movement. The state is doing its utmost to make sure each young man in Belarus is of use to his country. We view our young people as partners of the authorities and expect their more active participation in governing the state."

#### Veteran's Groups

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¶11. (U) Lukashenko charged veterans' groups, including "labor" veterans, with providing patriotic education and a sense of history. Especially now, "when Belarus is facing massive pressure

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from outside, there is special need for veterans' wisdom and experience. I want to assure you, you defended the country in 1945 and we will defend it now."

#### Quality is Job One

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¶12. (U) Switching to economics, Lukashenko stated there is "massive demand" for Belarusian goods worldwide. However, partially due to "drunkenness, absence without leave, and low labor productivity," and partially due to complacency from this high demand, he complained that the quality of Belarusian goods is too low. For example, he objected that Belarusian tractors are often shoddily made precisely because of high demand, and that Minsk's road repair crews have to "patch the same holes every day." He specifically tasked the Prime Minister with improving quality, but also called on all Belarusians to do what they can.

#### State Support Only to Deserving Enterprises

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¶13. (U) Lukashenko announced that as of January 1, 2007 the GOB would reduce its support, subsidies and tax breaks for many enterprises. "Only self-sustainable and competitive projects will

be supported," and the money saved would be used for cutting-edge technologies. State support would also switch from large enterprises to more small and medium enterprises. Lastly, he claimed that state control over businesses would be reduced only to cover, "the fulfillment of their obligations to the state, customers and employed workers. As for other parts of economic life, freedom of action should be given to company managers and labor collectives."

#### Belarus' International Problems

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¶14. (U) Lukashenko stated that Belarus has two major international problems. The first is the, "unprecedented pressure from the West on our country, constant threats of imposing sanctions and other inadequate, I would even say absurd, measures." The second is rising global energy costs. [Note: He never mentioned Russia in context with rising energy costs.] While claiming the rising costs of energy and other basic materials could lead to worldwide economic collapse, he maintained Belarus will continue to develop and pursue "a multidirectional policy aimed at expanding sales markets for our goods." He added that a unipolar world is not acceptable to Belarus, therefore Belarus will continue to be active in the Non-Aligned Movement, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and will continue to build close ties with states in Africa and Latin America, as well as with the U.S. and EU. He stated that China is the main target of Belarus' "eastern policy."

#### Union with Russia Important, But What Kind of Union?

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¶15. (U) In addition to promoting integration through the CIS, the Eurasian Economic Community and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Lukashenko called the benefits of union with Russia "indisputable." However, he added that, "joint efforts are being made to find the optimal model of cooperation within the union state."

#### Orders to Parliament

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¶16. (U) Lukashenko finished his speech with a set of directives for parliament. First, he ordered them to create a legal basis for the decisions made at the All-Belarusian People's Assembly<sup>F</sup>. Specifically, he called on parliament to reduce bureaucracy, suppress corruption, strengthen the family and boost the birth rate, streamline the way prices are set, and provide more high-quality and affordable housing. He also demanded parliament simplify the tax code once and for all. Lukashenko complained the Ministry of Taxation adopted 123 new legal acts and 69 amendments to previous tax bills in 2005. During the first quarter of 2006 the GOB amended the tax code a further 42 times, making six changes to VAT alone. He called for parliament to once and for all create a stable tax system.

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#### Questions

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¶17. (U) As in past years, Lukashenko opened the floor to questions. Unlike last year when parliament was silent, seven MPs presented questions, which Lukashenko spent another 40 minutes answering. Most were not broadcast on television. Four of the MPs had questions dealing with Belarus' shrinking population. Lukashenko turned down a suggestion for a new holiday, Day of the Father, and suggested that Belarusian women have five children each.

#### Lukashenko in the Protests?

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¶18. (U) Proving that all was not scripted, MP Olga Abramova (a quasi-independent politician) asked three questions which provoked Lukashenko's ire: would Lukashenko reconcile with the opposition?, why is the GOB closing independent newspapers?, and what are the benefits for Belarus in a proposed strategic partnership with China?. This sparked a lengthy presidential rant, in which Lukashenko claimed opposition leaders Aleksandr Milinkevich and Aleksandr Kozulin asked him not to break-up post-election protests so they could "save face." Lukashenko stated that he ordered Viktor Sheyman, then head of the Presidential Administration, "do not touch anybody. Do what they ask -- let them save face." But the opposition then turned "impudent," and Lukashenko had to react appropriately. He then stated, "They are not opposition, they are thugs." Lukashenko further claimed he was "physically present in the thick" of the opposition protests on election night. He concluded that he is, "ready for dialogue with those opposition forces which set normal tasks dealing with preserving the people and the state. But what dialogue can be held with the current Belarusian opposition leaders who are calling for economic sanctions against the people?"

¶19. (U) Lukashenko then claimed the GOB had "not touched" any opposition newspapers, but that some had closed for financial reasons. He was glad this happened, since these papers only published "false and tendentious rumors." He claimed he is proud China wants to be a strategic partner to Belarus, and said Belarus is not isolated internationally. He added that the U.S. and Canadian Ambassadors did not attend his speech as they would be ashamed to hear him speak the truth. [Note: No EU Ambassadors were present either, and there is no resident Canadian Ambassador.] He concluded that the western visa bans are "funny" and a sign of the West's weakness.

¶20. (U) MP Vasily Khrol launched into a sycophantic tirade agreeing with everything Lukashenko said and complaining of the western media's coverage of the Montenegrin referendum. Khrol asked Lukashenko to make Easter Monday a holiday, to which Lukashenko bluntly replied Belarusians already have too many holidays.

¶21. (U) In the last question of the day, MP Nikolay Cherginets repeatedly attacked the U.S. and agreed with Lukashenko's characterization of western policy. He then asked why Lukashenko had stayed silent when the West falsely accused him of electoral falsification. Lukashenko replied the West could criticize if it feels such a need. He said he had instructed his government to challenge the visa bans in international courts and mentioned that the GOB should ban the flight of U.S. and Canadian planes over Belarus (ref B) as a response to the "absurd" decision of U.S. and Canadian authorities to deny PM Sidorsky's plane service.

Comment  
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¶22. (SBU) Lukashenko's speech basically repeated the themes of his most recent addresses, but his almost obligatory attacks on the West have lost much of their fire and even his attacks on the opposition were rather subdued. Perhaps recognizing the threat from civil society, the youth and workers, Lukashenko ordered his regime to make inroads with these same groups the opposition has been courting: youth, the elderly, and local city councils. Nothing Lukashenko said indicated any dramatic change in regime foreign policy or that Lukashenko might initiate domestic reforms now that he has secured his third term. Most notable was the relative absence of Russia in his speech and the adulation of Belarus' new "strategic partner," China. This may reflect the current cooling in Belarusian-Russian relations as Minsk and Moscow joust over energy prices and the future of the union.

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